

SIGNIFICANCE OF YORKTOWN

Yorktown is a site not only of national significance but also of worldwide prominence for its associations with the cause of freedom. This small community is significant in American military and political history, commerce and trade, and architecture. In addition, the village retains much of its eighteenth-century character. Yorktown's historical and architectural significance, as well as its important archaeological resources, have qualified the village for listing as an historic district in the National Register of Historic Places.

Architecture

Based upon National Register criterion C, Yorktown's architecture has national significance in American history, architecture, archaeology and culture as follows: (1) it embodies distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction, namely its fine examples of Georgian architecture, seventeenth-and eighteenth-century brick and frame residences, and marl construction; and (2) the archaeological remains of other buildings important to the history of the village.

Yorktown retains a large number of its eighteenth-century buildings and features, giving the village the appearance of an earlier time that contrasts with the twentieth-century commercial development along nearby U.S. Route 17. Most of the village's original lot lines – those laid out on the bluffs in 1691 – are extant. Main Street still dominates the street network in the upper portion of the village, and all of Major Lawrence Smith's seven original cross streets still remain. Three currently connect to Water Street, the major thoroughfare of the waterfront area. An eighth street, Comte de Grasse Street, was added after the Revolution and provides an additional connection to the waterfront.

Residences, dating from the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, form a significant number of the village's architectural resources. Several fine examples ranging from modest to grand give insight into the domestic life of Yorktown's mercantile and political residents. The Sessions House (lot 56) dating from 1692 is one of the best examples of a seventeenth-century brick residence in York County, if not Virginia, and the earliest in Yorktown. The five-bay Flemish-bond structure features a clipped gable roof and two T-shaped exterior end chimneys. The Thomas Pate house (lot 42), built shortly after 1700 by York ferryman and ordinary keeper Pate, later was owned by Cole Digges and his children. The four-bay, Flemish-bond brick house was extensively remodeled in 1925. The Somerwell House (lot 36), built by Mungo Somerwell, a local ferryman was later part of the holdings of the Lightfoot family. Dating to before 1707, the restored three-bay Flemish-bond brick residence served as a hospital during the Civil War. The Ballard House (lot 54), built by Captain John Ballard in 1744, is a five-bay frame structure with beaded clapboards. Adjacent to it is the Edmund Smith House (lot 53), five-bay Flemish-bond brick structure built in 1751 and restored in 1976. Fronting on Nelson Street, the building was altered early in this century and its entrance reoriented for a time to serve as the guesthouse for the adjacent Nelson House, then known as the York Hall estate.



Nelson House



Dudley Digges House

Two Yorktown residences are of particular note. The Nelson House (lot 52) is perhaps the most elaborate residence in the village and one of the finest examples of Georgian architecture in Virginia. Built about 1730 by Thomas “Scotch Tom” Nelson, the house remained in the Nelson family until 1914 when it was purchased as the nucleus of the York Hall estate. During his 1824-25 tour of America, Lafayette stayed at the Nelson house while revisiting the site of Cornwallis’s defeat and surrender to American and French forces. The two-story, five-bay, Flemish-bond brick structure has stone quoins, sills, lintels and keystones, a central doorway with gauged and rubbed brick piers, a pedimented, side-gabled roof with a generous dentil cornice, and two interior chimneys. Smaller and simpler – but no less significant – is the Dudley Digges House (lot 77), an outstanding example of a mid-eighteenth-century one-and-a-half-story house in Virginia and one of the few surviving wood-frame houses in Yorktown. Built about 1755, the five-bay structure features five gabled dormers that pierce the north and south slopes of the roof. Four frame outbuildings are contemporary with the house.

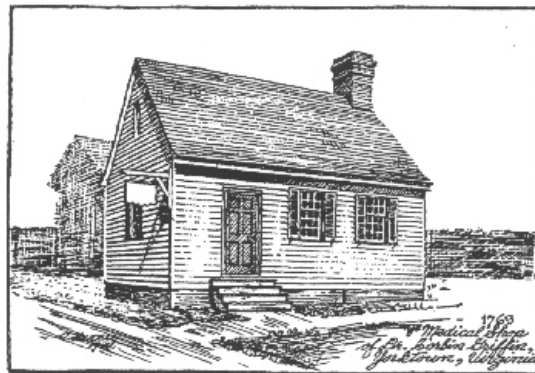


Grace Church

Several non-residential structures are important architectural resources in Yorktown. Grace Church (lot 35), dating to about 1697, is one of Yorktown’s few surviving colonial structures built of marl. A naturally occurring, limestone-like substance formed by the combination of clay and shells on the ocean floor, marl was used for the foundation of many early buildings but less frequently for their general construction. The church was gutted by fire in 1814 and the main portion restored in 1848, at which time the exterior walls may have received their present stucco coating. The two-story, brick Custom

House (lot 43) with its steeply pitched hipped roof was built in 1706 by Richard Ambler, the custom collector. Due to Yorktown's importance in the tobacco trade, the Custom House may well have been the best known public building of its day in Virginia after the Capitol and Governor's Palace in Williamsburg.¹

War and natural disaster have taken their toll on Yorktown's historic architecture, including two Nelson family residences. American shelling in 1781 destroyed the brick residence of Secretary Thomas Nelson, one of the earliest-known losses. A large, H-shaped house on lots 46, 47, 84 and 85 belonging to Thomas's brother, William Nelson, was destroyed by fire in 1814, although its buried foundations are extant. The Medical Shop (lot 30), built about 1769, also was a casualty of the same 1814 fire, which started in the adjacent Lawrence Gibbons house and swept through much of Yorktown. The Medical Shop, reconstructed by the National Park Service in 1936, was probably similar to other such buildings throughout the colonies at that time. The Archer cottage (lot 107), built by Thomas Archer in the early eighteenth century on the Yorktown waterfront, also was destroyed in the 1814 fire and was reconstructed shortly thereafter on the original foundations. The Swan Tavern (lot 25), built in 1722, no doubt was one of the most popular buildings in the village, enjoying much patronage from the Court House (lot 24, the third of five courthouses on its site) across the street. The tavern was destroyed by fire when ammunition stored in the Court House by Union troops exploded in December 1863. The National Park Service reconstructed the Swan Tavern in 1930.



Medical Shop

Yorktown has continued to attract those seeking an exceptional quality of life. In the twentieth century, several important residences have taken their places alongside the homes of earlier periods, and have achieved significance in their own right. The Flemish-bond brick Hornsby House (lot 64), built in 1933 in the Georgian Revival style, has a prominent location on Main Street. Its materials, massing and high level of detail, as well as its gardens and outbuildings, make it compatible with historic structures such as the Nelson House.

Perhaps the most significant development of the twentieth century in Yorktown is the strong presence of the National Park Service, and its stewardship not only of many of Yorktown's historic homes and buildings, but also of the adjacent battlefields, fortifications and other historic sites. The National Park Service's interest and involvement in Yorktown dates to the 1930s – contemporary with early restoration and reconstruction efforts in Williamsburg – and resulted in the purchase of much of the

¹ Trudell, Clyde F. *Colonial Yorktown*, p. 91.

village and surrounding landscape. Since that time the Park Service has emphasized restoration and re-use of structures wherever possible, supplementing the available resources with effective interpretation.